

Submitter: Mari Schay  
On Behalf Of: Summer Scholars  
Committee: Senate Committee On Education  
Measure, Appointment or Topic: SB604

Hello Chair Frederick, Vice Chair Weber, and members of the committee,

My name is Mari Schay and I am the Program Coordinator for Music Education at Portland State University. I am writing in support of SB 604: The Strong Start Program at Oregon's Public Universities, which will continue funding for programs that give underrepresented students the support they need to find success as they start their journey in higher education by giving them an early start and providing additional resources to get them off on the right track.

I have taught Portland State's Summer Scholars program for two summers. What started as a way to earn a little extra salary has turned into a strong belief that this program matters and that it is moving the needle for students who might otherwise not have a shot at a college education.

Students in Summer Scholars are admitted to conditionally admitted PSU because of a low GPA in high school – between a 2.5 and 3.0. Most of my students have been first generation students and many of them are bilingual, navigating their education in a language they do not speak at home.

Summer Scholars requires students to take both an academic skills and a college-level course in their pathway. In my case, these are students with a passion in the arts who have not always applied the same focus to their academics as they do to their art. Many do not see themselves as smart, academic, or capable of college level work. Being in a cohort with other creatives means they care about the subject. Being in a cohort of students with a history of low academic achievement students means they are the “smart kids” in the room. There is no one else who will answer the question, explain the concept, raise their hand – or make them feel inadequate. And they more than rise to the challenge. In the three weeks we work with the students, they emerge as curious, passionate, capable, supportive, and ready.

Do they all thrive once “released” into their first year? Not quite. But very close. The statistics speak for themselves.

Of the 47 students I have had in two classes, 45 are still enrolled at PSU and 34% had a 3.5 or higher at the end of this fall quarter. Remember, these are students who would not have been admitted to a traditional college. I truly believe Summer Scholars made the difference for many of them – and so do they. Students from both cohorts have told me they felt more confident, capable, and connected after participating in Summer Scholars.

This program matters. When you fund SB 604, you don't just change the trajectories of the students who participate: you change the trajectories of their siblings, their future children, and even their parents since these students will help support and inspire their families moving forward. They will be Oregonians who will pay back into the system with higher wages in just a few years.

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